

Editors react slowly to Pinkville exclusive

WASHINGTON

Sometimes it is not easy to sell editors a good story. The experience of Seymour M. Hersch, a Washington freelance writer, illustrates the point.

Last September 6 the Associated Press carried a story from Fort Benning, Ga., that an Army officer had been charged with murder in connection with the deaths of an unspecified number of civilians in Vietnam in 1968. Two months later several reporters received tips about a lieutenant and what was called the "Pinkville" massacre. One of the reporters was Hersch, who is a former AP reporter.

With the promise of \$1,000 from a philanthropist, Hersch set out to track down the story. He first went to Salt Lake City, where the lawyer for First Lt. William L. Calley Jr. lives and then to Fort Benning where Calley was being held, charged with 70 civilian deaths. It took Hersch two days to find Calley and get the first story containing a few details of what happened at Songmy, South Vietnam.

When Hersch encountered a *New York Times* reporter at Fort Benning he decided he had better not sit on the story.

Hersch was loosely affiliated with Dispatch News Service, a confederation of free lances organized in Saigon in 1968. The general manager of Dispatch is David Obst and Hersch appointed him his agent to sell the story.

On October 11, Obst telephoned a number of newspapers offering Hersch's story for \$100. He said he talked with 50 editors and 36 decided to buy it.

The *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, the *Charlotte Observer*, the *Chicago Sun-Times*, the *Milwaukee Journal*, the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, the *Boston Globe* and the *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin* front-paged Hersch's report. The *Washington Post* and *Newsday* bought the story but assigned their own reporters to check it out. A "Pinkville" story in the *New York Times* was independently gathered, according to Max Frankel, Washington bureau chief.

Meantime, Hersch was still on the trail of the story. He saw a news item that Ronald L. Ridenhour, a former GI, had

said letters to congressmen and the Pentagon prompted an Army investigation. He flew to California to see Ridenhour and obtained the names of several eyewitnesses.

On October 19, Obst again phoned newspapers offering interviews with three soldiers who claimed to have been in Pinkville. No box-score of buyers of these interviews is available but the *Washington Post* was one purchaser, although it assigned its own reporters to interview the soldiers for purposes of obtaining its story.

Hersch's lawyer, Michael Nussbaum, said CBS offered \$10,000 for an interview with Paul Meadlo, one of the soldiers at Songmy. Meadlo gave CBS an account of the incident which was broadcast in an interview with Mike Wallace. Nussbaum said Meadlo received none of the \$10,000.

Hersch wrote a story about Meadlo but whether he was able to sell it to any newspapers has not been disclosed.

Ridenhour is reported to have engaged a literary agent to try to sell his story to various magazines. Not long before the story broke big in the headlines, the agent told Ridenhour that none of the publications he approached were interested.